



# Pandemic Flu

## Executive Briefing, March 2007

### **Purpose of this note**

This note is intended to give an overview of the pandemic flu. It is designed to give the reader simple, easy to read answers to the common questions, and to give the reader suggestions to check their preparedness to face a pandemic.

### **What is Avian Flu?**

This is literally influenza which occurs in birds. There are many subtypes, one such subtype is identified as H5N1. It is this subtype which has caused extensive disease in poultry and rare but severe illness in humans. To date, pretty much the only way of catching H5N1 is directly from diseased birds (poultry, fowl). H5N1 is, however, a strain of flu which is able to mutate rapidly. This means that it may have the ability to change its form such that it could become contagious through human to human contact. This has not happened yet. If/when it does it will be the start of a pandemic.

### **What is a Pandemic?**

A pandemic is an infectious disease which spreads across many countries in a short timescale. Epidemics are local or regional occurrences. Previous pandemics include the Black Death and the Spanish flu. The World Health Organisation estimates that the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918 killed between 20 and 30 million people. Due to the recent World War, this fact was not widely reported. With increased global travel a new pandemic could theoretically cause illness in between 25% and 35% of the world's population.

### **How many people have caught Avian Flu?**

To date (Feb. '07) only a small number, 271 cases, have been reported to the World Health Organisation (WHO). However, of these cases there have been 165 deaths. Most of the human cases have been in South East Asia. It is this very high mortality rate which is causing concern within health organisations across the world.

### **Where could it start?**

The WHO fears that this pandemic may originate in Vietnam or China, where hundreds of millions of people live in daily contact with birds/pigs. There have also been concerns about the spread of the disease by birds migrating to Europe. This may increase the risk of the infection spreading to European flocks of poultry. If this occurs, then the virus could mutate in Europe. There is no agreement amongst the experts on a universal answer to where it may start.

# Pandemic Flu

## **What drugs are available against a Pandemic from Avian Flu?**

Antiviral drugs are effective against most flu viruses. Until the precise mutation of the H5N1 virus is identified it will not be possible to develop vaccines which will provide immunity to this variant of the flu. Stockpiles of the only drug, (Tamiflu), which could be used to slow down and reduce the severity of the flu, are being held within the UK. The Government will make decisions on who will receive supplies. This is liable to be those who are in essential jobs first, e.g. healthcare workers. There will probably not be sufficient stocks of drugs to treat everyone. Production of Tamiflu is limited by the number of factories capable of manufacturing it. Roche, the producers of Tamiflu have opened additional production capacity and have donated stocks to the WHO for use in developing countries.

## **What will be the impact of a flu pandemic in the UK?**

No one knows exactly what the impact will be. The WHO estimates that the H5N1 pandemic could easily reach the scale of the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918/1919. We now have considerably more and faster international travel than existed during this previous pandemic. The Australian Government has plans to seal off the country from the world, closing air and sea ports, in the event of an outbreak. Its contingency plan also calls for compulsory quarantine, closing schools, public transport and places of work. The UK Government is likely to advise measures of "Social Distancing" by suggesting avoidance of activities where crowds gather e.g. sports, concerts and other such gatherings. The Scottish Executive has recently released a document advising schools to plan for closure. Governments may also be seeking assistance from businesses to permit flexibility in working hours.

## **Why should businesses in the UK be concerned at this time?**

The Cabinet Office committee has given direct instructions to the NHS across the UK to prepare for a pandemic. Accordingly, they are reviewing their business continuity and emergency plans to ensure that if the pandemic starts they will be prepared. The NHS is considering scenarios such as operating with 30% of their staff absent due to the flu. Unlike previous strains of the flu, a pandemic flu will probably be non-discriminatory in who it hits. It is possible that it will hit fit, active people just as readily as the elderly and the young. If this is correct, then the impact will be felt right across a workforce. It is only by taking this risk seriously now that businesses will be able to prepare for it.

## **What type of organisations may be impacted?**

Essentially all organisations will be impacted by a pandemic. Government advice against unnecessary public gatherings at events like sports matches, theatres, cinemas and concerts could clearly have a major impact those sectors. As public confidence is hit, so attendance at restaurants and bars will reduce. This pattern was seen in Toronto during the SARS outbreak there. With many organisations now running just-in-time stock management systems, any changes in either demand or supply could have major implications. Demand for foodstuffs is liable to rise as people stockpile for safety. If this happens at the same time as transport industry is impacted by sickness absence supermarkets may have problems replenishing their shelves. On-line shopping via the internet is liable to show growth as individuals retreat to the safety of their homes. Any organisation which has responsibility for public health and safety will certainly be operating in a markedly different environment. It is anticipated that organisations could experience absentee rates between 15% and 30% over a 6 to 8 week period.

# Pandemic Flu

## What practical steps should organisations take now?

- Review and test existing business continuity and contingency plans. Run table top and scenario tests, to be sure you'll know what to do.
- Consider how your organisation could operate if the UK Government does issue advice about social distancing, i.e. avoiding public gatherings, restricting your travel, school closures, etc.
- Educate your staff in matters relating to hygiene, sickness and your policies in respect of a flu pandemic.
- Get in touch with Local Authorities to collaborate on contingency plans at a macro level.
- On the assumption that staff will restrict their movements, carry out a review of remote-access technologies and home-working policies.
- Develop HR policies to support staff on extended periods of sickness, or caring for sick relatives.
- Cross-train staff to perform a range of functions. Identify any member of staff whose unique skills make the organisation dependent on them.
- Review the readiness of all key suppliers to your business. Do you have suppliers in the Far East? Do you have staff that travel to that region frequently?
- Continue to watch the World Health Organisation, Department of Health and Health Protection Agency websites for further information.
- Make someone in the organisation responsible for planning for a flu pandemic. To be effective, this should be a Director or other very senior manager.

## Timescales

No one can predict with any accuracy when this pandemic will occur. The WHO alert level is at Phase 3. If the virus mutates it is conceivable that there would be a rapid progression through Phases 4, 5 and 6. Should the WHO indicator rise to Phase 5, there isn't likely to be sufficient time left to start planning and testing an organisational response.

## Is this just another Y2K scare?

In the run up to the year 2000 all available experts were unanimous in agreeing that there was a risk to software and systems if steps were not taken. Accordingly, organisations responded to this advice and more than £10billion was spent globally on preparations. Maybe there was no need for this expenditure and Y2K was a "Phantom Menace". However, an equally valid view is that it was only through the considerable efforts of many businesses and individuals that there was little impact. Experts from the WHO (and others) are telling us that we're at risk from a flu pandemic, the scale of which will be unprecedented. Shouldn't the business community be getting engaged with them now?

# Pandemic Flu

## Further Resources

- Fact Sheets on Avian Flu are available from the World Health Organisation website - [http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian\\_influenza/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/en/index.html)
- The 'Flu Wiki' (open website for all collaborators) is available at <http://fluwikie.com> . This is a constantly evolving site with information being added from all around the world.
- The USA Centre for Disease Control - <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/>
- UK Department of Health website with specific Avian Flu information. <http://www.dh.gov.uk/PandemicFlu/fs/en>
- There is a well researched and comprehensive book, freely available as a download from [www.birdflubook.com](http://www.birdflubook.com)

## Acknowledgement

Glen Abbot is grateful to Dr. Jonathan Van Tam, Consultant Epidemiologist Pandemic Influenza Office, Health Protection Agency for his assistance in the preparation of this document.

### About Glen Abbot

Glen Abbot's position in Scotland is unique. No other consultancy practice operates across the public and private sectors in the manner Glen Abbot achieves. Glen Abbot is the "thought leader" for business continuity and emergency planning in several local authorities in Scotland. Glen Abbot is also providing leadership in Business Continuity to several major oil and gas companies across the world.

If you would like to receive a copy of Glen Abbot's highly respected "Thin Ice" newsletter please email [thinice@glenabbot.co.uk](mailto:thinice@glenabbot.co.uk).

Glen Abbot provides strategic and tactical consultancy, training, readiness and plan audits, plan and organisational testing and software services.

Glen Abbot's engagement model is to ensure that skills transfer takes place to the client. This ensures that the clients gain maximum benefits from Glen Abbot's breadth of experience.

**Glen Abbot**

+44 (0)8450 531537

Website: [www.glenabbot.co.uk](http://www.glenabbot.co.uk)